

1. INTRODUCTION

Executive Summary

Previous Comprehensive Development Plans for the City of Atlanta have primarily focused upon issues within the City. As we move into the 21st century, it is necessary to view the City in the context of the region in order to understand and better plan for the growth and development of the City.

In an attempt to achieve this goal, the City will rely upon the in-depth research conducted by the Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy, which was included in the study “Moving Beyond Sprawl: The Challenge For Metropolitan Atlanta”, printed December 1999.

The Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy seeks to understand how large economic, demographic and policy trends affect cities and metropolitan areas. The center conducts research nationally, working through local scholars and practitioners to comprehend these trends. The Center’s mission statement is to shape a new generation of urban policies that will help build strong neighborhoods, cities and metropolitan regions.

It is interesting to note that many of the City’s current policies and projects address the findings from the Brookings Institute Center. The report on the Atlanta Metropolitan Area is divided into four sections: (1) Issues facing the Region, (2) Regional Trends (3) Conclusions and (4) The Challenge For the Region.

Issues Facing the Region

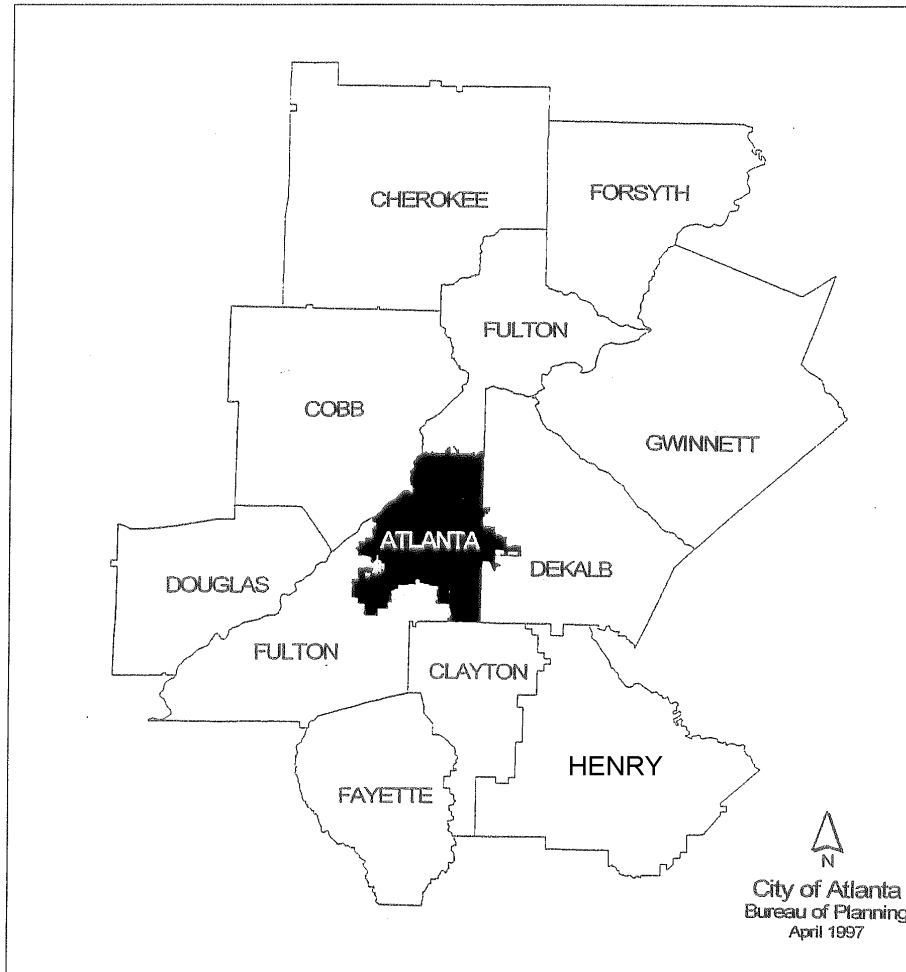
The Atlanta Region is one of the nation’s great metropolitan success stories. Home to four of the ten fastest-growing counties in the nation, the area has added more than 650,000 people and 850,000 jobs since 1990. Its diverse economic base includes rapidly growing, white-collar industries that are increasing per capita wealth and indicate continuing regional affluence in the future. It is becoming a center for high-tech employment. Population and job growth show no signs of slowing in the Atlanta area; the region may see two million more residents in the next twenty-five years. The region is a place of economic opportunities for both whites and African-American, and it is a magnet for new immigrants from Latin America and Asia.

But Atlanta is experiencing the downside of this incredible success. Low-density development has made its urbanized area grow rapidly, replacing farmland and forests with asphalt, subdivisions, and low-rise commercial buildings. The region’s water systems, trees and green space, and air quality are severely affected by its rapid expansion. Recent anxieties about sprawl, traffic congestion, and environmental degradation in the Atlanta region have resulted in increased public demand for information about the negative consequences of the region’s growth.

There is an often-stark divide between northern, affluent parts of the Atlanta region and poorer, slow-growing southern areas. The Atlanta region’s growth problem is much more that that of too-rapid suburban growth: it is a problem of unbalanced growth between the northern and southern parts of the region. The majority of new residents, new jobs, and new wealth are on the north sides of the Atlanta region – both within the City of Atlanta and its suburbs. At the same

time, the most rapidly growing population centers are outer suburban areas up to thirty miles from Atlanta's central business district.

Map 1-1: Region Map



Jobs, people and prosperity have moved northwards and outwards, leaving a large area of little or no population growth, economic decline, and an unusually high concentration of poverty on the south side of the City of Atlanta and its close-in southern suburbs. The far, exurban south side of the region does have some rapidly growing areas, particularly Henry and Fayette counties, but as noted above, this prosperity is outwards, far from the region's core. The region's division is not between city and suburbs; many parts of the City of Atlanta have gained jobs and population in the last decade; and in established neighborhoods of north and northeast Atlanta the median home prices are among the highest in the region. Despite the presence of a large middle-class black population in the region, the north-south dividing line between prosperity and poverty strongly corresponds with long-standing residential racial segregation patterns.

The challenges of the northern and southern portions of the region are fundamentally connected. A disproportionate number of the region's jobs are in one half of the region, so roads on the north side become more clogged with traffic. High housing prices on the job-rich north side and a desire to avoid economically declining neighborhoods on the south side cause new residents (and builders of new homes) to "leapfrog" further out into the metropolitan fringe. The northward tilt

of job growth also means that jobs move farther away from the inner neighborhoods of south Atlanta and the close-in southern suburbs, keeping the region's low-income and minority workers spatially isolated from economic opportunities. Overcrowding in the northern parts of the region and stagnation in the southern parts of the city and its neighboring suburbs also create a two-pronged environmental crisis. On the north side, extensive development and traffic congestion threaten air and water quality and eat up green space; on the near south side, an aging infrastructure and a concentration of "dirty" industry increase the chances of environmental degradation and could present a troubling public health problem. It is clear that the polarizing growth trends in the Atlanta region are hurting fast-growing counties and further isolating slow-growing communities. If left unchecked, the pattern of development in the region will permanently affect its environmental assets, its residents' quality of life and possibly its economic potential.

The Atlanta region has an opportunity to move beyond sprawl and tackle both the problems of explosive growth on the north side and too little growth on the south side. The Atlanta region already has one powerful tool to address its sprawl problem – the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA). This state entity, run by a board of civic and business leaders appointed by the Governor, is one of the most promising efforts to address metropolitan sprawl in the nation: it provides an opportunity for the region to envision and achieve alternative forms of growth. Atlanta also has a great advantage in that its regional planning organization and local scholars have conducted research on the city and region to a degree that is unmatched in most U.S. metropolitan areas. This region can tackle the big questions facing the Atlanta metropolitan area in a well-informed, comprehensive way and in doing so provide a model for other regions.

GRTA's present mission centers around reducing traffic congestion and improving air quality. Yet this only addresses one side of the sprawl challenge. In their efforts to find better ways to grow, GRTA's leaders and others in the Atlanta region cannot ignore the full array of forces that drive growth in some parts of a region and not in others. Poor schools in one jurisdiction push out families and lead to overcrowded schools in other places. A lack of affordable housing in thriving job centers lead to long commutes on crowded freeways for a region's working families. Expensive housing – out of the reach of most households – in many close-in neighborhoods creates pressures to pave over and build an open space in outlying areas, as people decide that they have to move outwards to build a future. In order for anti-sprawl efforts in the Atlanta region to work, there must be a broad, multi-faceted response that addresses both the consequences and the driving forces of unbalanced growth.

The major recommendations to address metro area needs are threefold. First, the region needs a transportation agenda that embraces an alternative vision of land use (particularly concerning residential and commercial development) and invests in public transit as a competitive necessity. Second, the region needs an ambitious housing agenda that stimulates the development of affordable housing for low-moderate- and middle-income households throughout the area. Third, the region needs an economic development agenda that leverages public and private sector investments in the slow-growing portions of the city and nearby counties. In carrying out these actions, the region needs to recognize the pervasive role of race in shaping metropolitan growth patterns and undertake sustained efforts to give African-Americans and other minorities greater access to educational and economic opportunities.

Atlanta Regional Trends